Vilt

Människor och djur i Sibirisk urskog

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This is an old book which I have for a long time observed in my marginal bookshelves. I wonder about the origin, but I believe, and like to believe, that it is a legacy from the library of my grandfather. It is a Swedish translation of a Russian book published by a now defunct Swedish publisher. The cover shows an unattributed painting of a white mountain framed by an opening between spruces. It is mildly enticing and suggesting some rather mundane if interesting vignettes from Siberia. When I finally picked it down from the shelf[1] it turned out to be something quite different. The original title, has nothing to do with the Swedish, it is simply Дерсу Узала the name of a Native hunter[2] whom the Russian government explorer Arsenjev accidentally encounters on an early expedition in the far east of Siberia, at the turn of the century. The book turns out to be an homage to this self-reliant hunter, whose Russian speech is rendered primitive, but whose intelligence and resourcefulness wins the admiration of the Russian author, and subsequently his sincere friendship and gratitude, as the man more than once saves the life of Arsenjev. Me unbeknownst, it turns out to be a rather well-known book, rather than the utterly obscure I had envisioned, written in the early 1920's and being filmed twice, once in 1961 by a Soviet director, and in 1975 by Kurosawa.

The whole action, encompassing at least three expeditions, as the book is divided into three parts, take place in the Ussuri district in far eastern Siberia. A major drawback of the Swedish edition is the lack of a map. It is not trivial, in fact almost impossible, to reconstruct the itinerary of the various expeditions from the many obscure villages and rivers which are mentioned, often with *ad hoc* transliterations by the aid of an Atlas. Another drawback, more understanding, is the lack of photographic illustrations. Arsenjev is a government official whose mission it is to explore, and I presume map, the scantily known region. The book gives almost no indication of what is the nature of the assignments, save from some intermittent references to mapping and writing down itineraries. Instead we are given indeed adventurous vignettes, mostly of serious tribulations which affect the members of the expedition. We are being made privy to bitter cold, dramatic fires and inundations, blisters causing debilitating infections, exhaustion, starvation and dramatic encounters with wildlife, be it moose, boars, bears and most frighteningly tigers, It is a land of wilderness and original forests, no doubt of great beauty, although the author prefers to

[1] Following a worry that I had not seen it for some time, and maybe it had been accidentally given away while doing a recent sorting out of books.

[2] actually a Nanai,- Нанайцы or Udege Уде́гейцы a shredded and vanishing subpopulation of the Tungusic people, at the moment numbering between one or two thousand individuals.

describe weather rather than landscape[3], and the most memorable visions turn out to be bright starry skies rather than scenery[4]. It is wilderness, indeed sparsely populated, but not entirely devoid of people. In addition to scattered tribes of aboriginals, there are small villages populated by Koreans or Chinese. The Chinese are everywhere. They eke out a living in the most unimaginable ways, from being simple robbers, to farmers, trappers, and planters of gingsen.

The most resourceful of them all is the native hunter, the hero of the book. His experience and resourcefulness turns out to be legendary. When he walks in the forests, he not only observes traces and signs, which are almost invisible to his Russian companions, he also may connect them and interpret them in feats of forensic analysis, thus in the manner of a Sherlock Holmes, and real life to boot, he is able to reconstruct intricate tales of what has just been going on. As he is encountered he is already an old and worn man, whose wife and children have vanished a long time ago. He is still adept with his gun and displays great stamina, but before the end of the book, his eye-sight will have deteriorated beyond control, especially for a man so dependent upon his sight to keep alive on shooting game.

Russia was a colonial power. This has been somewhat obscured by the fact that the colonial lands were not only geographically adjacent but successfully incorporated into the country itself. The Russian presence in Siberia, especially its eastern extreme, is a foreign and somewhat tenuous one. There is not only the original population to contend with, in many ways similar to the Indian populations the thrust westwards American colonists had to deal with, but also other colonizers, such as the Chinese and the Koreans. It is natural for colonizers to held up their own culture as superior, but not in the case of Arsenjev. He comes across as a very sympathetic individual, who readily acknowledges his own inferiority and cowardice. While it is common for great game hunters in Africa to depict themselves as intrepid heroes who go into battle against the wild terrifying beasts, while being surrounded by wailing and terrified Natives. (The fact that the white hunter is armed with lethal weapons and the Natives are usually unarmed may go some way to explain the state of affairs.). Arsenjev supplies a rather touching story as how he goes to hunt a bear, merely wounds it, and then beats a humiliating retreat when another bear shows up on the scene. The customary contempt for the native to be found among 19th and 20th century Westerners is totally absent from the author. On the other hand, all kinds of hero-worship come with at least some some faint fascist streaks. It is the extolling of the ragged individual hunter in this case, exhibiting the concomitant virtues of almost complete self-reliance. A kind of fascism which is also at the foundation of much ecological awareness, whether sentimental or not. It is indeed to a large extent unspoiled wilderness to which we are made witness, most of its virginal unsullied aspects no doubt being still available to us a century later. The character of Dersu Usala embodies an animist, who does not kill unless he is forced to, and who speak about all the animals as people, respectful

[3] Admittedly some scenes evoked of mountains, forests and mists, make you think of classical Chinese paintings on scrolls.

[4] At one point the author reports on a spectacular meteoric descent combining with a big bang and a bright flash lightening up the entire landscape. The events taking place before 1908 this cannot be an eye-witness account of the great event of that year.

of their rights to their niches. When Arsenjev thoughtlessly throws a piece of meat into the smoldering fire, Usala is quick to retrieve it from the glow. He is aghast. Another hunter may need it, and if none would come the way, there would be animals, crows, mice or even ants, whom one should not begrudge the potential feast,

Life on the unbeaten track seems in many ways to be rather tedious, as noted before, crammed with tribulations, shorn of amenities, burdened by deprivations. Yet, as the author observes, difficulties or misfortunes, once overcome are quickly forgotten. There are the usual routines. Setting up bivouacs (unless deserted huts are found), collecting firewood, paradoxically non-trivial in a forest, as only some kind of trees burn well, sharing meagre provisions, only intermittently augmented by successful hunting, and sleeping through the night by the fire, with a constant watch, and getting up at dawn. Trekking is arduous, the terrain is difficult, progress is slow, six or ten miles a day. Rivers have to be forded, the water is cold and the current strong and dangerous, And then of course the weather may be taxing. Rain in the forest is even worse than rain in the open. Trees and branches accumulate precipitation, which is added to the downpour, making you wet to the bone. Then there may be storms and floodings, and at other times the forest may be ablaze. In such boreal settings you expect bears, of which there are some different varieties, but the presence of tigers is somewhat disturbing, as you associate such beasts with steaming tropical foliage, not with snow and spruces, The expedition has one close encounter, if not an actual one, when a tiger sneaks in their camp and makes away with a dog. But Usala has old stories to tell about his near encounters, once he was even maimed by one, being nursed back to life. He has respect.

The end is tragic. Usalas keen eye-sight is failing him as he approaches his seventh decade. Maybe glasses may have helped. He will have to forego the life in the wild and settle with the author in the city of Khabarovsk. He is not used to live in a furnished room, preferring to sleep on the floor instead of in a bed. He is aghast at not being allowed to shoot in the town, nor to collect firewood but having to pay for it. he pleads for being allowed to return, if only temporarily to the woods. He does so, and is then found robbed of his scant possessions and murdered. The author is devastated. A grave is dug in the cold ground, but when the author returns a few years later, the whole area has been built up and all of the original landmarks have vanished, and he is not able to find the spot.

Arsenjev born in 1872 died in 1930, his wife became a victim of the Stalinist purges and was summarily killed, but some of their issue survived. A museum devoted to Arsenjev is to be found in Vladivostok, and as initially noted, he and his books did in the end achieve some fame and recognition.

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